

A COMPARISON OF INDIVIDUALIZED AND BASAL READER APPROACHES TO READING INSTRUCTION *

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All pupils in two sixth standards in a Dublin boys' primary school were randomly assigned either to an experimental group (n: 36) which used an individualized approach to reading or to a control group (n: 38) which used the traditional basal reader approach with a minor innovation to counteract possible Hawthorne effects. Both groups used the same classroom library and were taught reading by the same teacher. The experiment lasted for eight months. At the end of the experimental period, significant differences in favour of the experimental group were found in the book-reading practices of the group. The experimental group read more books and devoted more time to book-reading. Further, the fiction they read was of a higher quality than that read by the control group, and the range of topics covered in their non-fiction reading was wider. The attitude of the experimental group towards the reading class was more favourable than that of controls.

In recent years, due in part to dissatisfaction with traditional methods, many teachers have adopted new approaches to the teaching of reading. In Ireland until very recently it has been usual for each pupil to use the same basal reader. This contrasts with the United States where different texts are generally employed with different groups within the same class according to the reading attainment of the group. Some American teachers prefer an even more individualized approach, in which the pupil's level and pace of work are determined by himself rather than by a group. Research on the value of different approaches has not been very definitive and in Ireland has been almost completely absent. This article, part of a larger study of differences between individualized and traditional methods

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of teaching reading (4), reports on the effectiveness of the individualized approach in creating a positive interest in reading among Irish children.

Research studies on any aspect of reading in Irish schools are rare. A few have examined standards of reading; two such studies reported a lower standard for Irish children than for English children (14, 17). Neither study, however, attempted to identify possible differences in reading instruction between Irish and English schools. Two other studies, both of which leave much to be desired from the point of view of research design, attempted to measure outcomes of reading instruction in the affective area. In one of these (15), the reading and film preferences of nine and fourteen-year old boys in Galway were examined; about seventy per cent read newspapers regularly, half read comics and a lesser proportion books and magazines. The other study was carried out in Dublin (9) and found that the reading habits of the school children investigated were largely confined to comics and newspapers. More recently, Kellaghan and Gorman (13) have reported that Irish children who had access to public libraries have in general failed to make use of them. One final study (12) has suggested that an individualized approach to the teaching of reading, using commercially prepared materials, even for a short period of time, can have beneficial effects on speed and accuracy of reading.

These studies indicate two areas that should be of concern to Irish education. The first is the relatively poor performance of Irish children on standardized tests; this however, is not the focus of the present article. The second derives from the limited evidence available to date that Irish children may not be developing an interest in reading. The present study reports the results of an attempt to develop positive affect towards reading through the use of a method of instruction known as the individualized reading approach.

INDIVIDUALIZED READING

Individualized reading is an approach which was developed in the United States, and is currently favoured by a small percentage of the teachers there (2). Its lack of appeal among teachers may be explained partially by the fact that many school administrators are unconvinced that it is a satisfactory way of teaching reading; furthermore, some teachers may have been influenced by the conflicting results in published investigations.

To date, much of the research on the effectiveness of the individualized approach has been designed to test gains in the cognitive area; the study

of children's interest in reading has been of secondary importance. The results have been ambiguous. In some investigations it was found that children who had received individualized reading instruction performed better on standardized reading tests than children who used more traditional methods (1, 5, 8, 19, 23); other studies failed to find any difference between approaches (6, 18), while a number of investigations have shown that the use of individualized reading techniques resulted in lower gains in reading achievement than traditional approaches (11, 20, 21). While there is more general agreement among writers that the individualized approach helps give children an enthusiasm for reading (5, 6, 7, 11, 16, 19, 20, 22), more often than not this conclusion has been based on the subjective evaluations of investigators, rather than on the use of objective methods to measure interest.

In evaluating the research evidence one major source of difficulty is that though many authors speak of individualized reading, not all are talking about the same thing. The term has been used to cover a multiplicity of practices involving considerable differences in materials, aims and priorities and, one suspects, in the extent and quality of pupil-teacher interaction. Studies also varied in their methods of assessment and in many cases no attempt was made to control for teacher variation or for the Hawthorne effect. With this kind of variety, comparisons between and generalizations from different experiments became hazardous.

Because of the freedom teachers have behind the closed doors of their classrooms, because of differences in library facilities, and because of different objectives between reading programmes, it is highly improbable that any two individualized reading programmes will be identical. Despite these discrepancies there are certain basic elements which are common to most individualized programmes. Each of these elements was incorporated in the present study. First of all, in the individualized approach, each child chooses his own reading material which he reads at his own rate. This in effect generally means that strict adherence to class or basal readers for the purpose of instruction is considered both unnecessary and undesirable. Secondly, each child discusses his progress and the material he has been reading with the teacher. These 'reading conferences' are used for diagnostic and instructional purposes, and are held once a week or once a fortnight. Thirdly, groups are organized for one purpose only, i.e. to discuss common interests or to tackle common reading problems identified by the teacher during the reading conferences. If for example seven or eight pupils had difficulty identifying prefixes the teacher would quietly work with the group until the students had attained mastery. If on the other hand he was

introducing the class to dictionary skills he would instruct all the children in the class at the same time. Fourthly, each child is encouraged to do some activity based on what he has read. Some of the more popular activities in the present study were, making drawings of incidents in the story, writing questions to be answered by the next boy reading the book, and holding a discussion on a story when several boys had read the same book. Finally, it is essential that a record of the pupils' progress be kept. The type of records kept will vary according to the requirements of the teacher and the pupil, but the records should include information on the child's reading problems, reading interests, and where possible, his scores on standardized reading tests.

METHOD

Sample

The subjects of this study were 74 boys, enrolled in two sixth grades in a medium-sized Dublin primary school during the school year 1967-68. The school served an upper-working class area. The pupils were randomly assigned to an experimental (E) and a control (C) group. At the beginning of the study both groups were comparable in age (12 years, 4 months), reading attainment (R.A.: 11.2 on the Marino Graded Word Test), and verbal reasoning ability (SS: 106 on the Drumcondra Verbal Reasoning Test). To control for the problem of teacher variation both groups were taught reading by the investigator. Each group received forty minutes of reading instruction per day over a period of eight months and two weeks (151 schooldays). While one group was engaged at reading, the other was taught mathematics by the teacher of another sixth class.

Procedure

Approximately 400 books to be used by both groups for English reading* were gathered from the city library, the school library and from the pupils themselves. The books were housed in the classroom that was used for reading. Noticeboards were erected on which group E could display book reviews, posters, cartoons and crosswords inspired by their reading. To compensate for any Hawthorne effect in group E, group C prepared and

* The adjective English is used to distinguish English reading from Irish reading. Similar amounts of time are generally devoted to these subjects in Irish primary schools.

published a fortnightly school newspaper. This gave them a unique identity within the school and instilled in the group an *esprit de corps*.

In line with the five steps listed above each boy in the individual group was allowed to choose his own reading material which he read at his own rate. There was no compulsion to complete his book; neither was he obliged to do some activity each time he finished a book. As well as having individual and group conferences, whole class sessions were organized when it was apparent that all pupils could benefit from whatever topic was under discussion. On occasions, poems were read aloud by both students and teacher and then discussed. The most popular type of whole class session involved listening to short stories and excerpts read aloud by the teacher from such authors as Frank O'Connor, Sean O Faolain, W. E. Johns and Rosemary Sutcliffe.

Daily forty-minute periods were also devoted to reading by group C. All boys used the same reader which had been officially sanctioned by the Department of Education as being suitable for pupils in the sixth grade. The method of teaching reading outlined in the teaching manual *Obair Scoile* (3) was closely adhered to during all lessons. A typical class period went as follows. After an introductory period during which the pupils read a page to a page and a half from their prescribed readers, there was a brief discussion during which numerous pupils volunteered information as to what they had read. The next section of the lesson was devoted to explaining in detail words and concepts. Care was taken to see that the pupils could pronounce and explain each of the new words which had been written on the blackboard. The selected passage was then utilised for a brief session of oral reading. Finally, the class concluded with a period of direct and indirect questioning of the pupils on topics previously referred to during the lesson. The pupils in group C were free at any stage to go to the reading shelves in the room to borrow or return a book. However, they were not free to read their library books during the class period. The weekly short stories read aloud by the teacher to the individualized group also became a popular feature with the control group.

After an initial two weeks of minor chaos in the individualized programme, the pupils became accustomed to the various procedures involved and problems concerning class routine were rare. Throughout the experiment, the programme was quite demanding on the teacher as it necessitated keeping library records, records of each boy's progress, frequent examination of children's folders, organizing group sessions as well as trying to ensure that all pupils were working constructively during the class period.

Variables investigated

Subject preference. This was measured by a subject preference inventory (SPI), which was simply a list of nine school subjects which the children were asked to rank in order of preference from 1 to 9. Points were awarded for each choice, ranging from nine points for first choice to one point for the subject which the pupil liked least of all. The inventory has shown considerable consistency across schools and over periods of several months (12). The SPI was completed before and after the experiment.

Leisure time reading. Daily diaries divided into half-hourly sections were supplied to the pupils in both groups to record their leisure time activities towards the end of the experiment. From these diaries, the amount of time devoted to reading, and the kind of reading being done outside school hours was calculated. Seven diaries were written by each student over a period of a fortnight. Questioning of the children revealed that they were not aware that information about their reading habits was being sought.

Amount of reading, i. e. the number of books borrowed and *completely* read, based on records kept by each individual pupil during the course of the experiment. This measure was regarded as necessary since the number of books borrowed may not be a very accurate indication of the actual amount a student reads (10).

Quality of fiction material read. Three teachers, working independently, examined all the fiction books in the library. Each teacher was instructed to give a rating of one point to books he considered suitable for children in classes up to and including third standard; two points to books suitable for pupils in fourth and fifth standards, three points to books suitable for pupils in sixth, and four points to more advanced material. An intra-class correlation of the order of .90 was found between the raters. Given this high measure of agreement, it was considered reasonable to rate each book with the average of the scores given to it by the three raters. A mean 'quality' score of all the fiction books completed by each pupil was thus calculated.

Interest range of non-fiction material. Non-fiction books were classified into the ten main categories used in the Dewey decimal system. Number of categories sampled by pupils was taken as an index of interest range.

Attitude towards the reading class was obtained from pupils on a five point scale. They were asked if they felt the reading class was 'very interesting,' 'reasonably interesting,' 'all right,' 'uninteresting' or 'positively boring.'

RESULTS

Subject preference

The important point to consider is the position of English reading in the list of placings. Both groups nominated reading third in their order of preference on the pre-test. At the end of the investigation, it was still the third choice of the control group but had become the first choice of the experimental group.

Leisure time reading

Over a period of seven days before the investigation commenced, pupils in group E devoted 4.75 per cent of their leisure time to reading while the comparable figure for group C was 4.05 per cent. The difference between the two groups in the number of minutes they spent in reading was not significant ($t: .85$; $df: 72$; $p > .05$). By the end of the experimental period, group E had increased its percentage to 6.09 per cent while group C was spending 4.41 per cent at reading. While the mean number of minutes spent in reading by group E ($M: 249$ minutes) was greater than that spent by group C ($M: 179$ minutes), the difference between the groups was still not statistically significant ($t: 1.89$; $df: 72$; $p > .05$).

Figures for mean number of minutes devoted to different types of reading before and after the experiment are presented in Table 1. Differences between groups before the experiment are not statistically significant. As can be seen from the table, there was an increase in the amount of time

TABLE 1

MEAN NUMBER OF MINUTES DEVOTED TO DIFFERENT TYPES OF READING MATERIAL

(Information obtained in seven-day diary)

		Comics	Books	News-papers	Other
Experimental group (n: 36)	Pre-experiment	110.03	41.47	35.19	4.14
	Post experiment	41.47	181.28	18.28	7.78
	Difference	—68.56	139.95	—16.91	3.64
Control group (n: 38)	Pre-experiment	99.34	30.89	29.18	1.91
	Post-experiment	76.05	66.03	29.39	9.50
	Difference	—23.29	35.14	—21	7.59

given to book reading by pupils in both groups. At the end of the experiment, group E was spending 73 per cent of total leisure reading time at books, while group C was spending 37 per cent. The difference between the groups is significant ($t: 3.73$; $df: 72$; $p < .001$). There was, at the same time a decrease in the time spent reading comics for both groups. The difference between the groups in the amount of time spent reading comics in the post-experiment period was again significant ($t: 2.11$; $df: 72$; $p < .05$), control group children devoting more time to comic reading. The difference between the groups in the amount of time spent reading newspapers was not significant ($t: 1.04$; $df: 72$; $p > .05$).

Amount of reading

When we look at the number of books borrowed and completed by pupils we find evidence of extra reading being done by pupils in the

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF BOOKS BORROWED AND COMPLETED

	Borrowed		Completed		Borrowed		Completed	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Fiction	12.26	10.06	5.26	7.72	32.00	15.20	18.08	14.49
Non-fiction	15.74	11.15	2.21	3.50	13.50	9.00	4.69	5.61
Total	28.00	13.17	7.47	8.98	45.50	17.17	22.78	15.54

experimental group (Table 2). Differences between the groups, both for the number of books borrowed and for the number of books completed were significant. (For number of books borrowed $t: 4.87$; $df: 72$; $p < .001$; for books completed, $t: 5.15$; $df: 72$; $p < .001$). For fiction, differences between the groups, both for number of books borrowed ($t: 6.52$; $df: 72$; $p < .001$) and for number completed ($t: 4.71$; $df: 72$; $p < .001$) were significant. For non-fiction, the difference for borrowing was not significant ($t: .93$; $df: 72$; $p > .05$), while that for completing books was ($t: 2.27$; $df: 72$; $p < .05$).

Quality of fiction material read

The quality or level of books read by pupils in group E ($M: 2.18$; $SD: .46$) was higher than that read by group C ($M: 1.70$; $SD: 1.15$). This difference is statistically significant ($t: 2.31$; $df: 72$; $p < .05$).

Interest range of non-fiction material

Pupils in group E sampled more categories of non-fiction books than did pupils in group C; for E the mean number of subject areas read was 2.03 ($SD: 1.72$); for C, it was 1.26 ($SD: 1.46$). The difference is statistically significant ($t: 2.05$; $df: 72$; $p < .05$). In many cases only relatively small sections of non-fiction books would be of interest to children. Hence, a separate calculation was made of the number of books of which thirty or more pages were read. The result of this analysis also showed a significant difference in favour of the experimental group ($t: 2.01$; $df: 72$; $p < .05$).

Attitude towards the reading class

In the analysis of the data, because of the small number of responses in the categories 'all right,' 'uninteresting' and 'positively boring,' these categories were collapsed to form one, 'neutral to boring.' Of group E, 24 found the reading class 'very interesting'; nine found it 'reasonably interesting' and three placed it in the neutral-boring categories. Corresponding figures for group C were 'very interesting', 8, 'reasonably interesting', 13 and neutral-boring, 17. The application of the χ^2 test to the data showed that there was a strong relationship between the pupils' attitude towards reading and the type of reading instruction they received ($\chi^2: 18.48$; $df: 2$; $p < .001$). We may conclude that group E was more interested in reading than was group C.

Many widely differing reasons why they enjoyed individualized reading were given by pupils. In general however they said they welcomed the opportunity individualized reading afforded them to choose their own reading material, to read interesting books, and to increase their vocabularies.* Some of the children's comments taken from the questionnaire may be of interest. Except for some corrections in spellings the comments are given as written by the children: 'You can take in more knowledge from many books than from one. Find meaning for hard words.' 'You get a great determination to finish a book.' 'In the English book, you spend a few days on the same story. In individualized reading you can go on by yourself.' 'I never read as many books as I do now. We can pick out our own books.'

Out of a total of 38 boys in the control group, 24 indicated their satisfaction with the content of the prescribed reader. Some of their observations were: 'There is a good selection of stories and a lot of

* The Marino Graded Word Reading Test was administered to all pupils before and after the investigation. Large mean increases were recorded by both groups—2.50 years ($SD: .66$) by group E and 1.88 years ($SD: .65$) by group C. The difference between the groups' increases proved to be highly significant ($t = 4.09$; $df = 72$; $p < .001$).

interesting facts.' 'It is very interesting and we learn new words from it every day.' On the other hand, 14 boys quite definitely disliked the reader and criticised its 'uninteresting,' 'boring' and 'childish' contents. The following are representative comments: 'The stories are too short and it has far too many poems.' 'It is very boring going over each page. I get fed up of it. No good stories, no adventures.'

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation should be interpreted cautiously. For one thing, the sample which was used was small and the children were not representative of Irish school-children. It was not possible, for example, to include girls or pupils from rural schools. Again, pupils in the control group were not allowed to read library books in the classroom nor were any efforts made to raise the quality of the books being read by them. This was intentional as one of the important variables we wished to measure was the effect of having library books freely available during the class periods. The free availability of books during classtime of course is not the only feature of individualized reading and a further study in which both groups would be allowed read books in class, while other aspects of the individualized approach were varied, might prove interesting.

Despite these limitations, the findings are important enough and interesting enough to warrant further research to see if the results would be replicated under other conditions. If the results were to be replicated they could have profound implications for Irish education. While the traditional approach in Irish schools may develop basic reading skills, it is doubtful if it pays adequate attention to the development of recreational reading. The evidence from this study shows that an individualized approach to reading can help develop habits and attitudes which cause children to expand their interests, improve the level of their recreational reading and most important of all, it seems to give pupils an interest in reading outside of school. If these habits, attitudes and interests persist, they can hardly fail to make future education more profitable and life more enjoyable.

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